

A Church Slavonic Primer by Aleksander Brooks

Lesson 2 - Holy God, Trisagion

A hymn in Church Slavonic that many people are probably already familiar with is “Holy God,” and it will give us a good introduction to several concepts. In Church Slavonic, “Holy God” is

СВѢТЪИЙ БОЖЕ, СВѢТЪИЙ КРѢПКІЙ, СВѢТЪИЙ БЕЗСМѢРТНЫЙ, ПОМНІЛЪИ НАСЪ
/sv'atyī bozhe, sv'atyī kr'epkii, sv'atyī b'ezsm'ertnyi pom'ilui nas/
(СВЯТЫЙ БОЖЕ, СВЯТЫЙ Крепкий, СВЯТЫЙ Безсмертный помилуй нас).

This is a simple enough phrase that a literal translation pretty much matches up to the English language hymn. Thus, **СВѢТЪИЙ** /sv'atyī/ (with a grave accent) is “holy,” **БОЖЕ** /bozhe/ is “O God” (O because the word is, again, in the vocative; **БОГЪ** /bog/ is God in the normal case), **КРѢПКІЙ** /kr'epkii/ is mighty/powerful, and **БЕЗСМѢРТНЫЙ** /b'ezsm'ertnyi/ is immortal. We again have **ПОМНІЛЪИ** that we learned in Lesson 1, and **НАСЪ** /nas/ is “(on) us.”

In lesson one, I made several comments about pronunciation that need to be expanded upon. I initially said that each letter of the alphabet basically has one sound, but then I said that most consonants actually have two sounds. The reason for them having two sounds is that once letters of the alphabet are put together into words, they start influencing upon one another. Thus, when a soft-signifying vowel is placed after a consonant, the consonant will be pronounced in its soft variant. For instance, in **СВѢТЪИЙ**, the **В** is soft because the following **Ѣ** is a soft-signifying vowel. This **Ѣ** is essentially comprised of the **Ѣ**, that is, the letter called short “i,” that I explained in relation to **ПОМНІЛЪИ** and the letter **Ѧ**. When soft-signifying vowels are placed after certain and most consonants, the consonant will acquire this softness. There are, by the way, three always hard consonants and three always soft consonants.

Another comment must be made about our unfortunate transliteration. Having said the above about hard and soft consonants, we need to have a way in our transliteration to indicate hardness and softness. By convention, I will indicate softness with an apostrophe ('). (In some books, softness is indicated by a “j.”) Hardness will not be indicated in any way, because those consonants that are not soft are, naturally, hard. By deduction, you, I hope, will realize that those vowels preceded by an apostrophe are soft signifying. However, to make this more clear, I will start making a list at the end of each lesson's pdf of soft and hard signifying vowels.

This is something that you need to keep in mind at all times and especially when trying to pronounce new words; however, as I said in the first lesson, the best way to learn pronunciation is to listen to how it's pronounced and imitate.

A comment should also be made about the **ѣ** that appears in several words in this phrase. I have chosen to transliterate it with a "y" for convention's sake and because there's really no better way to do it, because this letter has no equivalent in English. This is, generally, the analog of **н** but is a guttural letter (a guttural letter has a sound that is created farther back in the throat). You can get an idea of the sound by saying "fish" while hitting yourself in the stomach. The resulting "i" is pretty close.

The Trisagion will introduce us to **adjectives** in Church Slavonic. (In these lessons, I would like to assume you already have at least an elementary knowledge of grammar, but will, nonetheless, briefly explain concepts. If you need more of an explanation, try the internet.) Most simply, *adjectives are words that describe other words*. So our phrase has the following adjectives: **свѣтъѣй**, **крѣпкѣй**, and **вѣзмѣртнѣй**. Holy describes/modifies God (which is a noun), while mighty and immortal do not directly modify any other word, but we understand that they describe God as well.

In the first lesson, I mentioned that a change in meaning/function of the word **Гѡспѡди** could be seen by the final letter. The fact that a word is an adjective can often be seen by its ending. *In the case of adjectives, the ending often consists of two or three letters*. Don't be frightened, but there are a multitude of adjective endings (at least 630 if I calculated correctly!); however, you will, I hope, learn them in context and maybe have an easier time than memorizing tables (however, if you'd like to try, contact me and I'll send you the tables).

In our three adjectives, we have two different variations of adjective endings. They are

-ѣй /yi/ and **-ѣй** /ii/. These endings right away tell us a number of things about this phrase and the words in it.

1. They tell us that the noun that they are modifying is **masculine**, and, thus, the adjectives themselves are (and must be) masculine as well. Yes, by the way, you read correctly: *adjectives have gender* in Church Slavonic. I should also note that gender of words does not necessarily match up with "femininity," "masculinity," and "neutrality," though we use the words masculine, feminine, and neuter when referring to certain words. For instance, I don't consider much to be masculine, feminine, or neuter about "flower," "mountain," and "ear," and yet these words are masculine,

- feminine, and neuter, respectively, in Church Slavonic.
2. They also tell us that the adjectives themselves and the noun they modify are in the “subject” case, which is called the **nominative case** (the “naming” case)), or the **vocative case**, or the **accusative case**, which will be explained below. (In many instances, the adjective endings for the nominative case and the vocative case are the same, and the ending sometimes coincides with the accusative case (so lucky you!.) However, since **Божѣ** is in the vocative case, we know that **свѣтъѣи** is also in the vocative case. And we deduce that the other adjectives are in the vocative as well.
 3. A third thing they tell us is that the adjectives are singular (oh my! **adjectives have gender and number!**) and, therefore, the noun they modify is also in the singular.

Adjectives always modify another word, a noun. So, once you recognize a word as an adjective, since adjectives and nouns go together, you can find the word that it modifies (which will match up according to gender and number) and further know more about the syntax, the structure, of the given sentence.

Let’s recall the final words in our hymn: **помѣлѣи нѣцѣ**. As we discussed in Lesson 1, **помѣлѣи** is a verb, specifically a **transitive verb**, which means that it will always have an object. (Yes, I understand the phrase **Господи помѣлѣи**, for instance, doesn’t have an object, but it does *imply* an object, which is “us.”) In Church Slavonic, there is a special form of words for this object, which is called the **direct object**, that is the receiver of an action. This is called the **accusative case** (think: they accused me). **When a word is a direct object, it will be in the accusative case.** This will be shown in a particular ending, just as I’ve mentioned for the vocative case. For pronouns, such as “us,” however, there are different words, but they are not so numerous and we will learn them in other phrases like this. Thus, **нѣцѣ** is the Church Slavonic direct object form of “us.”

For pronouns, this object case (direct or indirect), is one of the few instances where inflection has remained in English. For instance, we do not say “he hit we” because “we” is in the subject case in English; we say “he hit us” because “us” is the object. Here is another example wherein I hope you will start recognizing this object case: “They attacked us, but we did not attack them.” Here, we see “they” as the subject, but when we did not attack, we did not attack “them.” To round out our pronouns, here is another example: I saw *her*. She saw *me*.

There is another letter that you may have noticed above in **Богѣ** and **нѣцѣ**, and may have further thought that I must have made a typo, because this letter didn't turn up in the transliteration. This letter with no sound is called the “hard sign.”

It signifies that the previous letter is hard in sound as opposed to soft. It turns up in a few different places, but most often at the end of words. Certain words that end in a hard sign are masculine. (As an aside, there's a joke (though maybe it's true) that when Tolstoy's War and Peace was published after an orthographic reform in which the hard sign was taken off the end of words the book ended up being a third less in length.)

When it comes up in a word, we will be introduced to the soft sign.

Again, your liturgy book may have a different looking word in several places in this phrase. We now see the normal **titlo** in two words: **СѢМЬ** and **БЖЕ**.

Lesson notes:

Soft-signifying vowels	Hard-signifying vowels
И	А
ї	О
ѣ	Ѹ
ѣ̣	Ы
Ѧ	

Always hard consonant
Ж